2017

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Robert E. and Melton, James (2017) "Toward a Typology of Student Social Media Users Based on Posting Behavior: Research Note," *Journal of the Midwest Association for Information Systems (JMW AIS)*: Vol. 2017 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://aisel.aisnet.org/jmwais/vol2017/iss1/5>

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Date: 01-31-2017

Research Note

Toward a Typology of Student Social Media Users Based on Posting Behavior

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Abstract

This exploratory article presents a typology of student social media users based on their posting behavior. Specifically, the typology categorizes students using a matrix with two dimensions: 1) posting content appropriateness, and 2) student privacy concerns. Current research documents that students often post content that is not appropriate for all audiences. Given that employers are increasingly using social media as part of background checks for job candidates, students with inappropriate content are at risk of poor hiring evaluations. This potential problem is especially serious for students who make their content available to everyone. Evidence suggests that even when students know the risks they are taking some still make inappropriate posts. This paradoxical behavior requires further study. The development of a typology of student social media user from a posting behavior perspective is a step toward further research of this phenomenon.

Keywords: Social media, posting behavior, content appropriateness, privacy concern, typology.

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1. Introduction

The impact of social media on modern life is hard to ignore. Hundreds of millions of people visit social media sites daily. In fact, social media has quickly become one of the most popular Internet activities (Purcell, Brenner, & Rainie, 2012). While people of all ages use social media, college students were some of the first adopters and remain some of the most fervent users. Any professor who has tried to give a lecture in a room filled with computers knows exactly how addicted many students appear to be to their social media accounts. While student use of social media during a lecture may be an annoyance for the professor, unchecked use of social media can pose a far greater threat to the student. This is especially true when the student posts content on social media sites that is not appropriate for all potential audiences.

Research has shown that students often post inappropriate material on social media sites (Peluchette & Karl, 2010). If they posted this material in ignorance then their behavior could possibly be explained away as the folly of youth. Unfortunately, many students appear to know that what they are posting could cause them to be viewed in a negative light. Making matters worse, the material is often posted without restriction – allowing anyone to view it, including potential employers. This behavior, dubbed the “posting paradox” by researchers can have a serious negative effect on future employability (Miller, Parsons, & Lifer, 2010). Posting behavior should be further investigated. This article contributes to the existing posting paradox research by exploring a typology of social media users based on their posting behavior.

2. Social Media and the Posting Paradox

According to a recent Pew Center survey, social media use is growing across all social demographics. While many age groups have embraced social media, college-age adults continue to be the largest single group of social media users. In fact, Perrin (2015) reported that 90% of college-age adults use social media. Clearly social media is having a significant impact on society and college students, in particular.

Although the growth of social media has received a great deal of attention, how social media is being used is a far more interesting topic – especially as it relates to college students and what they post. The posting behavior of college students has been examined by a variety of researchers, investigating topics such as information disclosure (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009), inappropriate content (Peluchette & Karl, 2010), and audience concern (Miller et al., 2010). These researchers have reported that students often use social media to post content that is not appropriate for all audiences, especially potential employers. Considering the increased use of social media by companies vetting job candidates, inappropriate posting behavior can have a significant and negative effect on a student’s employment prospects.

Students are apparently aware that employers may be viewing their social media content (Root & McKay, 2014). They also appear to know when their content is inappropriate (Miller et al., 2010). Surprisingly, these two facts do not seem to change their behavior. Miller et al. (2010) found that students continued to post content that they, themselves, considered inappropriate for employers while knowing it could potentially be viewed by those same employers. The researchers dubbed this behavior the “posting paradox.”

The paradox has been explored in a number of follow-up studies. Melton, Miller, & Salmona (2012) showed that college students in Australia, Denmark, and the United Kingdom exhibited the same paradoxical posting behavior as those in the United States. The posting paradox has also been shown to be present in multiple social media platforms (Miller & Melton, 2015). Given the pervasive nature of the posting paradox, researchers have begun to investigate its nomological network. Miller, Salmona, and Melton (2012) developed an early model of inappropriate posting behavior that showed a student’s view of him- or herself being on the job market was a significant factor in the type of content that the student posts. Interestingly, students who viewed themselves as being on the job market posted more appropriate content, regardless of their time to graduation or their age. Essentially, once students view themselves as job seekers, they change their posting behavior in order to present a more favorable online image for potential employers. This initial research is encouraging because it suggests that student behavior relative to social media posting can be changed. Considering the negative impact that the posting paradox can have on a student’s employability, finding a way to change inappropriate posting behavior would be a significant accomplishment. That is the goal that inspires the current research

note and informs its overarching research question, “How can student posting behavior be changed to minimize the negative effects of the posting paradox?”

While early research has produced interesting results, many questions remain to be answered. For example, although the posting paradox is pervasive, research has shown that not all students post inappropriate content (e.g., Peluchette & Karl, 2010). By extension, it can also be argued that all students don’t exhibit posting paradox behavior to the same degree. If students exhibit differing degrees of posting paradox behavior, can specific groups of students be identified? If such groups could be identified then they could be individually studied to explore the specific motivations underlying their behaviors. A better understanding of student motivations could then lead to the development of more effective interventions designed to change student posting behavior.

If students are to be categorized relative to their posting behavior, what then should be the grouping factors? While many factors are possible (e.g., gender, ethnicity, social media experience), this article chooses to view student social media users through the lens of the posting paradox. Given that the paradox involves the posting of inappropriate material in an unrestricted, or public, manner, the selected factors should reflect the content being posted and the degree to which the posted content is public/private. In this article, therefore, the factors proposed to categorize posting behavior are posting content appropriateness and student privacy concern.

2.1 Posting Content Appropriateness

Posting content appropriateness relates to how well the material posted on a student’s social media accounts presents an image of the student that would be viewed positively by a potential employer. Since 93% of recruiters will review a job candidate’s social media presence before making a hiring decision (Jobvite, 2014), content appropriateness has become a significant issue. Unfortunately, reviewers often uncover content that doesn’t reflect well on the candidate. Reviewers reported damaging content ranging from poor spelling and grammar to posts about sex, drugs, and alcohol. These observations are supported by researchers such as Peluchette and Karl (2010) who found students commonly posted photographs of themselves with alcohol or in sexually provocative poses. They also found social media accounts that contained comments about alcohol/drug use, sexual activity, and profanity. This inappropriate content is more than just a commentary on today’s youth. It can have direct, negative, consequences when students enter the job market. In fact, inappropriate social media content has caused 55% of recruiters to actually reconsider a candidate – of those reconsiderations 61% were negative. (Jobvite, 2014).

Clearly, all students don’t post content that is inappropriate for potential employers. Even for students that do post inappropriate content, many will police the content on some of their social media accounts. For example, it is not hard to imagine a student who posts questionable content on his Facebook account, while presenting a completely professional image on his LinkedIn account. Many students may view the purpose and audience of their various social media accounts differently (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat for friends; LinkedIn for employers). While this segmentation of social media may seem completely reasonable to a student, recruiters view the situation differently. In fact, recruiters cast a very wide net when using social media to vet job candidates. According to a recent survey of recruiters, 93% reviewed the LinkedIn accounts of candidates as a part of the vetting process (Jobvite, 2014). While this number might not be surprising given LinkedIn’s audience, the fact that 35% of recruiters also reviewed Facebook accounts and 18% reviewed Twitter accounts, should cause students some concern. The continued, and growing, use of social media by recruiters makes content appropriateness an important dimension of student posting behavior.

2.2 Student Privacy Concern

Privacy concern is a topic that has received a great deal of attention from researchers in multiple disciplines. Much of this attention has focused on the concern people have to protect their personal information from organizations that collect and use it for unauthorized purposes (Smith, Milberg, & Burke, 1996; Malhorta, Kim, & Agarwal, 2004; Lwin, Wirtz, & Williams, 2007). The concern for privacy has become even more significant in our ever-connected Internet society. This is especially true for social media users who often post very personal information on their accounts. While it might seem logical that social media users would want to keep their content private, the very design of social media platforms encourages content sharing. By definition social media is meant to be social. Users of social media are encouraged to share content in order to connect with other users and build their social networks. It could be argued that keeping information on social media private is counter to its intended purpose. That said, all social media users do not

want to share all of their content, with everyone, all the time.

In this article, privacy concern relates to a student's desire to restrict access to their posted content. This view of privacy concern is related to the concept of privacy restrictiveness (Lankton, McKnight, & Thatcher, 2012). Since social media sites allow users to manage their privacy settings, students have to decide whether to restrict access to specific groups (e.g., friends, friends of friends, etc.) or allow unlimited public access. Students with a high privacy concern would restrict access to their friends only, while students with a low privacy concern would have no access restrictions. Interestingly, research has shown that privacy concern, as viewed through privacy settings, does indeed cover the spectrum. According to Madden (2012), while 58% of social media users set their accounts to private, 19% allow limited access and 20% are completely public.

As with content appropriateness, a student's concern for privacy will vary by social media account. For example, a student may choose to make his Facebook account private while making his LinkedIn account public. Again, this variable concern for privacy may seem reasonable given the posted content and the intended audience for each account. The ability to keep accounts private may even encourage some students to post inappropriate content in the belief that the content can't be viewed by potential employers. In the end, the variability in privacy concern can have a significant impact on a student's social media presence, especially when considered with the content being posted.

3. Proposed Social Media User Typology

As described above, posting content appropriateness and student privacy concern are both significant factors in the understanding of a student's social media presence. Neither factor, however, should be viewed in a vacuum. In fact, how the two factors interact seems to determine a great deal about the student's online image and, ultimately, may affect future employability. Building on this important relationship, a typology of student social media users is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Typology of Social Media Users

3.1 Appropriate Public

Students in the upper left quadrant post content that they believe is appropriate for potential employers. They are also not concerned about privacy. This means that their social media accounts are either public or open to a large network of potential viewers (e.g., friends of friends). From the prospective of a student entering the job market, this group is the

ideal. The posted content shows the student in the best possible light while being easily available to potential recruiters. Students in this group are getting the maximum return from their image-management efforts. The one downside for students in this group is that they may believe they have to censor themselves to maintain a positive image in such a public forum. These censorship efforts may detract from the overall enjoyment of their social media experience.

3.2 Appropriate Private

Students in the upper right quadrant post content that they believe is appropriate for potential employers. They are also highly concerned about privacy. This means that their social media accounts are either private or restricted to friends only. These students manage their online image by policing their content and restricting access. While students in this group might be viewed as playing it safe, their lack of openness could also be considered a negative. These students post material that could actually improve their chances of getting a job but they are not using the material to promote themselves effectively. Instead, the material remains locked away from potential employers who might want more information about a job candidate. Students in this group should consider opening access to their accounts so as to benefit from the positive material that they have posted.

3.3 Inappropriate Private

Students in the lower right quadrant post content that they acknowledge is not appropriate for potential employers. They are, however, highly concerned about privacy. This means that their social media accounts are either private or restricted to friends only. Essentially, these students post whatever they like but they limit access to their posted content. Students in this group want the freedom to express themselves but they realize that all audiences might not be as receptive to their content. They attempt to manage their online image – not through policing content but by restricting access. While this may make it more difficult for recruiters to see their content, it is hardly a bulletproof strategy. In fact, up to 35% of recruiters who use social media for vetting have requested to “friend” or “follow” candidates with private accounts (Wright, 2015). Recruiters send such requests because they want a chance to get to know the “real” candidate - beyond their resume and job application. Some recruiters also send friend requests because they view private accounts with suspicion. Essentially, these recruiters believe that if the account is private then the candidate could be trying to hide something (Thottam, 2016). For students in this group, the recruiters would probably be correct. It should be noted that any student with a private account (appropriate or inappropriate) could receive a friend request from a potential employer. While students in the previous quadrant (appropriate content) would actually benefit from accepting such a request and sharing their content, students in this quadrant clearly would not. Even if recruiters don’t try to friend or follow them, restricting access also has the downside of making it harder for these students to build their social networks.

3.4 Inappropriate Public

Students in the lower left quadrant post content that they acknowledge is not appropriate for potential employers. At the same time, they are also not concerned about privacy. This means that their social media accounts are either public or open to a large network of potential viewers (e.g., friends of friends). Given the nature of their content and the lack of viewer restrictions, these students are the most likely to experience negative employment results. As such, students in this group should consider policing the content they are posting, or at least restrict access by changing their privacy settings.

3.5 Non-participants

There is another group of students who do not fit into the typology but still deserve to be mentioned - those students who do not maintain a social media presence. For these students, the issues of content appropriateness and privacy concern are irrelevant. Since these students don’t have to worry about what is posted, or who can see it, this strategy may appear to be the safest choice for students entering the job market. Unfortunately, the pervasive use of social media may make students in this group appear less than desirable to potential employers (Parris, 2015). If a student has no social media presence, potential employers might decide that the student has deleted his or her accounts in an effort to cover something up. Employers might also decide that the student lacks social media and communication skills. Finally, if a student has no social media presence, employers might decide that the student simply doesn’t care or, worse, has

nothing to offer. For these reasons, 35% of employers are less likely to interview candidates that they can't find online (Wright, 2015). Clearly, avoiding social media has its drawbacks.

4. Directions for Future Research

Having proposed a typology of student social media users, the next step is to operationalize and validate a measurement instrument. The reviewers disagreed about the need for the proposed typology so more feedback is appreciated. For student privacy concern, the measure should be fairly straightforward - asking only what the privacy settings are for the students various social media accounts. For posting content appropriateness, however, developing a measurement instrument will pose a number of interesting challenges.

One such challenge will be to avoid biasing the responses by asking "loaded" questions. For example, students may not respond honestly to questions such as "Do you post sexually explicit images on social media?" or "Do your social media posts contain racial slurs?" Since the goal of the typology is to get students to realize where they are on the matrix, it is important that students answer the content appropriateness questions honestly. Therefore, to reduce the chance of bias, the questions could be of a more general nature, without identifying specific inappropriate content. As an example, "Do you believe your social media content would be viewed positively by a potential employer?" This use of general questions is in-line with the previous posting paradox literature and the instruments originally developed by Miller et al. (2010). These questions will allow students to honestly assess the appropriateness of their posted content without acknowledging the use of specific inappropriate material.

Since students view the audiences for their various social media accounts differently, it is expected that content and privacy settings will vary by account, even for the same student. As in the previously stated examples, a student could post questionable content on his private Facebook account while presenting a professional image on his public LinkedIn account. If a survey attempted to capture this student's accounts using a single measure for content and a single measure for privacy, the student would be forced to average his behavior resulting in a fairly meaningless response. For this reason, it may be necessary to have students complete the content appropriateness and privacy concern instruments for each of their accounts separately. The responses could then be used to determine the placement on the matrix for each of the student's accounts. Ideally, the instruments could be administered through a short online survey with students receiving immediate results showing their placement on the matrix for each of their accounts along with suggestions for better managing their online images.

Once an online survey has been developed and validated it can then be employed in a number of potential research studies. One such study would involve using the survey as a pre-test, post-test to measure the effectiveness of an intervention designed to modify student posting behavior. Assuming the intervention worked, the measures would show before and after movement in the quadrants of the matrix indicating a change in student posting behavior. If such an intervention was proven to be effective, it could become a standard tool used in freshman-level courses to dissuade students from beginning, or continuing, inappropriate posting behavior.

The survey could also be used to address the question "Do students really know what employers consider to be appropriate social media content?" While posting paradox research has relied on general content appropriateness questions to avoid biased responses, there have been no studies to date comparing general question responses to responses about specific inappropriate content. Given that recent surveys (Jobvite, 2014) have identified specific social media content that recruiters consider to be inappropriate, it would be interesting to see how students' general content appropriateness responses compare to their responses about specific inappropriate content.

Another avenue for future research would be to consider additional ways to categorize student social media users. The proposed typology categorizes students based on factors drawn from the posting paradox, namely posting content appropriateness and student privacy concern. While these two factors can be used to better understand the posting behavior of social media users, they are certainly not the only factors to consider. Other factors including gender, social media experience, attitude toward social media, can, and should, be explored in future research.

5. Conclusion

Social media use by college students is a significant and growing phenomenon. Through social media, students share a great deal about themselves and what they believe. Unfortunately, some of what they share could negatively impact their future employability. Getting students to understand that what they post, and who they share it with, matters, has been the underlying theme of this article. The typology presented herein is a first step in the development of measures and interventions to help students manage their online images through better posting behavior.

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